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DE GAULLE THE STATESMAN: OBSTRUCTIONIST OR VISIONARY?

Core Course 1 Essay

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Introduction

Assessments of Charles de Gaulle's impact on foreign affairs often paint a highly critical portrait of an egotistic and narrow-minded nationalist driven by an implacable Anglo-American bias dating back to the Second World War. Indeed, the depiction of the man as a dangerous maverick who nearly unhinged the Atlantic Alliance at the very height of the Cold War is suggested by some American scholars (Cook, pp. 332-333). This view does not do justice to the man. De Gaulle without question could be fiercely parochial in the defense of French interests, sometimes at the expense of Alliance solidarity. Nonetheless, his policies did not mark him as a quaint, nineteenth-century anachronism; rather, they generally reflected gifted insight by one of the visionary statesmen of our time.

Background

Any study of de Gaulle must begin with the influences that shaped his character and outlook. Common to his generation was a vision of France as a role model for the world, the France of 1789, whose values and accomplishments had made her the envy of Europe. There was much to justify this attitude. During the early twentieth century, when de Gaulle was a junior army officer, France had overcome a late start to the Industrial Age and enjoyed almost unrivalled prosperity. By 1914, France provided two-thirds of the world's iron ore exports and manufactured more automobiles than any other European country. Industrial production had tripled and national income increased 50% in the space of a single generation (Shirer, pp. 105-106). French culture, however, was her crowning achievement. In medicine and in the sciences, but

overwhelmingly in the arts and letters, the French stood second to none. Even Wilhelmine Germans, for all their hubris and industry, accorded France her due as typified by a common aphorism of the day: "As well off as God in France."
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(Tuchman, p. 31.)

De Gaulle the soldier similarly was the inheritor of a proud military tradition. From Turenne to Foch, the French generally were admired, if not feared, as the martial race of Europe. While the rise of Germany in 1870 overmatched France's dominance on land, the French Army heroically had fought the hereditary enemy to a standstill during the terrible bloodletting of 1914-1918. The harsh peace settlement that followed World War I was designed in part to restore French military hegemony on the Continent.

Although perceptive observers had noted the army's lack of offensive spirit as early as 1936, the French Army on the eve of World War II was widely believed to be the strongest in Europe. Accordingly, the 6-week conquest of France by the Germans in 1940 was an almost unbearable humiliation; the incredible suddenness of the army's failure --- supposedly invincible behind its Maginot Line --- magnified the shock of defeat. One French historian termed the episode "...the most terrible collapse in all the long history of our national life." (Shirer, p.22.) The subservient role to which French arms were relegated during the 1944-45 liberation exacerbated wounded French sensibilities, and subsequent defeat in Vietnam at the hands of Asian peasants reinforced the image of the French Army as an antiquated, third-rate force. It was an image that de Gaulle the leader surely was determined to expunge (Cook, p. 334).

Idealism as the Foundation of Statecraft

Once returned to power in 1958, de Gaulle wasted little time in

revitalizing the French political process. The foundation of his views clearly was his idealistic vision of France, not mere nationalism as some critics aver. The distinction is a subtle one. De Gaulle firmly believed that France's unique heritage entitled her to a leading position among nations (Harrison, pp. 52-53). He defined the sine qua non for leadership as independence, or the capacity to act decisively in the national interest (Harrison, p. 49).

De Gaulle was convinced that France could contribute most effectively to the Atlantic Alliance through her independent stance, for only in this fashion could the natural genius of the French nation reach its full potential. Moreover, history had taught him that a failure of the national leadership would fractionalize the French political system and reduce France to impotence (Kissinger, p. 109) --- as occurred during the debilitating decade of the 1930s. De Gaulle therefore acted quickly to remedy the parliamentary inadequacies of the Fourth Republic. His Fifth Republic, with its sweeping executive powers, provided the forum he required to summon the French to the heights of greatness ordained by their rich culture, democratic traditions and long history of accomplishment (Nixon, p. 44).

Ironically, de Gaulle's conviction that France was destined for a special role among nations was not entirely dissimilar to declarations by post-1945 American statesmen proclaiming the United States as the world's standard bearer for democracy. De Gaulle faithfully stood by the Western allies in their hours of greatest peril, but his bold challenge to American leadership earned him contempt and even ridicule in Washington and London. This may have been inevitable given France's relatively small size and reduced power, and certainly contributed to friction within the Atlantic Alliance. To the Gaullist theory of statecraft, however, Anglo-American approval was not

nearly as important as the character of French leadership and French national will. De Gaulle singlehandedly supplied these traits for France and he was prepared to go it alone in foreign affairs, if necessary.

Pragmatism and French National Interests

The first key national interest addressed by de Gaulle also was the most fundamental: French national survival. He approached the issue on two levels. A master of Realpolitik, de Gaulle insisted --- correctly --- that sovereign states remained the supreme authority in the existing global nation-state system. He would cooperate with the United Nations and North Atlantic Treaty Organization when it served France's purposes, but he refused to surrender freedom of action to supranational organizations (Harrison, pp. 50-51). On the theoretical level, then, preserving French options concerning the national defense became a paramount consideration.

Even more critical was the protection of French soil. While de Gaulle was prepared to join the Americans in resisting Soviet challenges to the balance of power, he regarded with anathema Washington's concept of an overarching American-led coalition in which separate foreign policies by component states became all but impossible (Kissinger, pp. 104-105). Such a concept not only subordinated French interests to those of the Alliance, but exposed France to potential attack should a peripheral crisis involving Americans anywhere (e.g., Quemoy/Matsu or Cuba) escalate out of control (Cook, p. 355). In de Gaulle's view, the NATO integrated command hamstrung French independence to an unacceptable degree. His solution --- withdrawal from the Alliance's military arm --- seemed extreme at the time, but no lasting damage resulted to NATO.

Ensuring political stability in Europe was a second national interest of

overriding importance. Perhaps the most difficult task facing de Gaulle, it comprised three interrelated issues: rehabilitating Franco-German relations, addressing the reality of Soviet power and neutralizing British influence in Continental affairs. French foreign policy in these areas illustrated both the strengths and weaknesses in Gaullist thinking.

De Gaulle's approach to Germany was ambivalent from the beginning. France had suffered the consequences of German aggression three times in just 70 years. In 1919, an earlier French government sought to demilitarize their powerful enemy to the east; de Gaulle recognized all too well that such an option was hardly viable in the Cold War. He did insist on a bilateral understanding with the new West Germany to supplement the NATO security umbrella (the 1962 treaty with Adenauer's government was the result), but however much he may have been wary of a German resurgence, de Gaulle knew West German military and economic power was necessary to forestall additional Soviet inroads in Europe. In this respect he was more realistic than his political predecessors, for whom the unwelcome specter of 12 new Bundeswehr divisions ultimately doomed the abortive European Defense Community negotiations during 1950-1954 (Albrecht-Carrie, pp. 633-634). Probably de Gaulle assumed France could hold her own, economically and military, against revived West German power; the prospect of German reunification, remote in his lifetime, surely would have posed an unwelcome development.

Dealings with the Soviets were based strictly on pragmatic considerations. Taking the long-term historical view, he saw Soviet foreign policy in the context of traditional Russian interests papered over with a communist facade (Cook, p. 356); ergo, the Soviet tanks that crushed Nagy's uprising in Budapest in 1956 materially differed little from the Tsarist Cossacks who drove Kossuth's revolutionaries from the same capital in 1849.

That Communism as an ideology was relatively inconsequential in de Gaulle's thinking seemed simplistic and alarming to American statesmen. The difference simply was a matter of perspective. Possibly the long existence of vigorous Communist/Socialist political parties in Europe --- so unlike the American experience, which had endured recurring Bolshevik scares as late as the 1950s - had immunized the French to the terrors of ideology. At any rate, de Gaulle consistently counseled firmness based on power in dealing with the Soviet Union (the Berlin crisis of 1961 being the best example), and his advice proved sound.

Finally, de Gaulle's political order in Europe required blocking British membership in the Common Market. While he cited ingenuous rationales for this policy, two mattered foremost. First, British participation naturally would dilute French influence, and de Gaulle was determined that the new Europe would develop under French auspices as much as possible. A related issue was the United Kingdom's "special relationship" with the United States. To de Gaulle, the British were neither fish nor fowl, scarcely European at all, so that admitting the United Kingdom to the Market would serve only to introduce unwelcome Anglo-Saxon agendas into internal European affairs.

A third national interest crucial to de Gaulle was orchestrating the projection of French values. Here he matched his idealistic vision for French leadership with hard-won lessons drawn from Indochina and Algeria. The French president anticipated that European recovery and the emergence of the Third World made the breakdown of bipolarism inevitable. He concluded France was the natural spokesman for the "third force" and dreamed of leading a new European coalition to facilitate superpower detente. Although unrealistic in retrospect, the concept arguably represented a reasonable attempt to resurrect traditional balance-of-power diplomacy. In an increasingly dangerous bipolar

environment, de Gaulle believed the long French experience in diplomacy enabled his government to contribute to peace in ways the inexperienced and rash Americans could not (Nixon, p. 75).

This outlook did not imply neutralism for France by any means. De Gaulle always welcomed the American security guarantee, and he was hardly alone in fearing the rigidity of existing bipolar political alignments magnified the danger of conflict (Albrecht-Carrie, p. 625). Toward the end of his career, detente became his raison d'être in foreign affairs. From 1967-1969, de Gaulle personally and extensively lobbied American officials to end the Vietnam War in order that movement toward detente might proceed (Nixon, p. 75).

The Force de Frappe

The development of an independent and much maligned nuclear strike capability for France deserves special mention, as it provided an invaluable tool to advance all French national interests. De Gaulle was not the first man to advocate this capability for France, but he recognized its indispensability (Cook, p. 344). As an insurance policy, nuclear weapons with the appropriate delivery system held Moscow hostage and thereby served to deter potential Soviet warmakers --- a matter of some concern in Western Europe during the early 1960s, when the new Kennedy-McNamara doctrine of Flexible Response raised doubts regarding the willingness of the American leadership to put New York at risk to safeguard Berlin or Paris. On the European scene, such weapons provided the ultimate guarantee against a revanchist Germany. To the Third World, the force de frappe commanded the prestige and respect due a Great Power. It goes without saying that President Kennedy's 1962 proposal for a multilateral nuclear force under American

command violated every precept of Gaullist policy; the MLF was stillborn as far as the French government was concerned.

Diplomacy and moral leadership may have been the main tools de Gaulle relied on to advance policies, but these alone obviously were inadequate. It was not enough for France's voice to be heard in world councils; de Gaulle wished to be heeded as well. Playing the nuclear card obscured significant French economic and military weaknesses and so contributed immeasurably to the effectiveness of the more conventional tools (Harrison, p. 56).

The Balance Sheet

The final measure of any national leader invariably is a checkerboard of successes and failures. De Gaulle's record is remarkable because he sketched a bold blueprint for the future, succeeded more often than he failed and won for France new respect among the leaders of the world's most powerful nations. Although the process proved painful for his allies, his ability to influence great events from a position of weakness was impressive.

In French affairs, de Gaulle surely was successful in stabilizing the French government, no mean feat given the seriousness of the Algerian crisis and fragility of the Fourth Republic during the late 1950s. If he devoted insufficient time to internal economic matters, it was because his gaze remained fixed on loftier horizons in the diplomatic realm. De Gaulle likely expected that increasing French stature in Europe and abroad would produce collateral economic advantages at home.

His intra-European policies were mainly successful and the effects continue to be felt to this day. The new Germans apparently exhibit no recidivist tendency for territorial expansionism or desire to acquire nuclear weapons; these facts alone represent a major triumph for French diplomacy.

France's voice is not the dominant one within the European Economic Community, but her influence continues to be telling. Nor is there strong evidence to suggest future EEC integration measures will cripple the French independence of action so carefully nurtured by de Gaulle.

The French president was recognized as a giant on the international scene even in his own time. Occasionally he miscalculated, as when he judged Khruschev's 1962 humiliation over Cuba to signify the beginning of the end for the Soviet empire; conditions were not yet ripe for true detente (Harrison, p. 70). Even in this instance, though, he was not entirely off the mark, since the Kremlin's unforeseen military buildup of the 1960s and 1970s bankrupted the Communists into accepting glasnost in the 1980s.

De Gaulle's most controversial action was the 1966 withdrawal from NATO. American military officers still refer to this event in incredulous terms; the "loss" of France seemingly deprived the Alliance of the operational depth required to blunt a Soviet blitzkrieg in the West. On balance, however, French independence offered real advantages to NATO, particularly as de Gaulle made it clear France would fight in the event of a new European war. France's changed status actually complicated Moscow's warfighting strategy. Thanks to de Gaulle, Soviet campaign planners now were forced to anticipate a probable tactical nuclear defense by NATO, a possible strategic nuclear strike from the United States or British forces, and a French tactical or strategic nuclear response. The potential for provoking a nuclear exchange had become so great that one wonders if any invasion strategy could have remained viable.

Finally, de Gaulle's anticipation of a multipolar world reflected a clarity of vision typified by none of his contemporaries. He discerned evidence of the Sino-Soviet rift at an early stage and astutely foresaw the strategic advantage that could accrue to the West thereby. But French power

in the end was not sufficient to weaken the American hold on NATO, and the Third World was too fractious to exert meaningful influence over the superpowers. France could contribute to the evolution of detente but had to be content with American direction of the process. Still, his recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1964 foreshadowed the famous Sino-American rapprochement of 1971, and a definitive accounting of the French contribution to ending American involvement in the Vietnam War remains to be written.

Henry Kissinger described the "Colossus of de Gaulle" with the words, "De Gaulle's overriding challenge was to restore France's faith in itself." (Kissinger, p. 106.) De Gaulle more than met the challenge. He inspired France to transcend its limitations as a second-rate power and, for a brief time during 1958-1969, regained a measure of the grandeur the French once enjoyed as their due. For de Gaulle and the world, the results justified the effort.

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